In the middle of 1996, during a period of cross-strait tension, ‘An Open Letter to the Social Elite of Taiwan’ was distributed. The letter was signed by Chou Wei-lin, for a group named Club 51. The Club was unknown at the time. But whenever there was a chance to disseminate its ideas thereafter, the Club would be on the street. In early 1999, when the controversy over relations between Taiwan and the PRC broke out again, Club 51 could be found protesting in front of the American Institute—the equivalent of the US embassy on the island—against Washington’s ambiguous stance. It might have been thought that the Club was there to demand American intervention in the Taiwan Straits to counter the threat of an attack from the mainland. But no, it was more radical than that. The captions at the top of the first page of its Open Letter called for Taiwan to join the United States of America as its 51st State, so as to ‘Guarantee Taiwan’s Security, Stability, Prosperity, Liberty and Democracy’.

Founded on the Fourth of July 1994 by 51 intellectuals and businessmen with American experience, the Club had grown to some 500 supporting members by 1996. Since then it has not generated any large movement, but has been quite visible in the media. Its chief animator, Chou Wei-lin, who has law degrees from universities in Taiwan and the US, is a former activist of the Taiwan independence movement, and an extremely articulate writer and speaker. Taiwan’s leading newspaper, China Times, devoted a full-page interview to him and to his Club’s ideas in May 1996,
and he has appeared on various TV and radio call-in shows.¹ In 1998, encouraged by both sympathetic and antagonistic reactions to the Club’s programme, Chou published a highly imaginative work to substantiate his arguments and lay out his moment of utopia. It is entitled *A Date with the US—the Ultimate Resolution of Taiwan’s Future: Taiwan becomes a State of the US in 2013; Say Yes to America*. In it, Chou advocates a two-stage strategy. First, Taiwan becomes a trust territory, along Puerto Rican lines; then it seeks full statehood, along Hawaiian lines. Eventually, on January 1, 2013, a splendid sunny day, Taiwan becomes the fifty-first state of the USA. All Chinese names are changed forthwith: Yuan to Adams, Kung to Cohen, Chen to Dunn, Ding to Dean, Chou to Jefferson. All cities and districts acquire new place-names: Taiwan becomes Formosa again, while Taipei becomes Cambridge, Taichung Dalton, Kaohsiung Fairfax, and Hsinchu Talcom. Among the newly elected 46 members of Congress representing Taiwan, 22 are fluent in English; of these, fourteen are first or second generation mainlanders, and eight are natives, all educated in the US. Here are to be found the next generation of leading politicians, including James C. Stevens Jr (Soong Zheng-yuan, son of ex-governor James Soong), and Vincent W. Lane (son of former Vice President and current Chairman of the KMT, Chan Lian). On this fortunate day, the Taiwanese finally have ‘a sense of belonging, a sense of certainty, a sense of direction and a sense of security’.²

What is the significance of Club 51? A moralizing reaction, common to nationalist left and right in Taiwan, will not be helpful in bringing out the issues at stake. In our part of the world, it has been a frequent practice to jump quickly to moral judgement in social controversies, foreclosing the possibility of critical reflection that might help us to understand better the real psychic forces at work in our societies. Two signs suggest it would a mistake to dismiss the Club’s project as merely outlandish. In abandoning any claim to national sovereignty, with the alteration of a single capital letter—switching from ‘State’ building (in the sense of Japan) to ‘state’ building (in the sense of California)—Club 51 projects a sea change in the parameters of the anti-colonial imagination that powered independence movements in the Third World in the

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¹ For detailed coverage, see Chang Pin-yi, ‘Club 51—Slogan: Neither Unification nor Independence, Let’s be American: Make Taiwan a State of the US’, *China Times*, 29 May 1996.

² *A Date with the US*, p. 324.
past. Its form of identification might remind us of France’s *départements d’outremer* or, indeed, the fate of Hawaii; but its timing at the turn of the twenty-first century does seem to indicate an emerging new condition, beyond earlier historical moments of decolonization. There is another reason for such an impression. The impulses behind Club 51 are not confined to Taiwan. Comparable sentiments can be found in Manila and Okinawa, in Seoul and Micronesia, not to speak of Canada or Australia. How does one account for them? What can we learn from Club 51?

**Our island USA**

The Taiwanese background, of course, is a very specific one, and colours the fantasies of Club 51 throughout. The central arguments of the Club are highlighted, point by point, in the first paragraphs of its Letter of 1996:

> If Club 51 cannot awaken the Taiwanese elite in time to give up such selfish and short-sighted practices as individual immigration, and to support instead the proposal of ‘Taiwan’s State-Building Movement’ for collective identification and naturalization into the US, within a few years Taiwan will not be able to escape the appalling fate of ‘Hong-Kongization’. Even if it could avoid this, it will be permanently beset by Beijing’s psychological warfare, plunging it into economic recession, falling confidence, and social unrest.

Conjuring up the spectre of Hong Kong on the eve of its handover to China in 1997 is calculated, of course, to trigger fear and insecurity in the Letter’s target audience. But the Club’s appeal does not just rest on demonizing the Communist threat to Taiwan. It also offers an attractive alternative to panicky individual exodus abroad. ‘Once Taiwan becomes another state in the US, we will be in America right here, and Taiwanese will not have to dwell in other places throughout the world as a minority of minorities in local societies’. The ingenuity of the Club’s proposal lies in its radical resolution of the deadlock over Taiwanese independence. The message is: let us give up our own nation-state, with its hopelessly ambiguous status, and join instead another of our choice. State-building will then no longer require endless, impossible and unsuccessful efforts to join the United Nations. We will just have to deal with one nation. Our half-way Americanization of the past fifty years can advance to a full new nationality. This vision is pitched not just to the elite, but to everyone living on the island. It answers to a general desire to ‘stay at
home’ at this moment in history, as the economic success of Taiwan has drawn numbers of emigrants back to the island, after bad experiences of being discriminated against abroad—‘the minority of minorities’. The Letter goes on:

When Beijing announced its ‘missile rehearsals’ to threaten the Presidential election in Taiwan, our Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs called upon the Director of the American Institute, begging the US to uphold justice for Taiwan. Any clear-sighted person knows that Taiwan cannot survive without US protection. If the United States does not defend the principles of justice, ‘the Republic of China in Taiwan’ might soon become ‘the Republic of China in Los Angeles’.

Here the US figures as a power whose mission is to maintain the principles of global justice, without which the Republic of China would dissolve into something else. In the Taiwanese context, the Club’s gesture is provocative, even iconoclastic. For although everyone knows that the island is indeed under American protection, this is never publicly admitted by the state leadership. It simply remains the unspoken assumption that frames and encircles the activity of all the political parties—the KMT typically seeking ‘help’ from the Republicans, and the DPP from the Democrats. Questions such as whether Taiwan could survive without the US military shield, or without the mainland Chinese market, have never been and can never be debated in the public arena, least of all during Presidential election campaigns. Hence the effect of the Club’s blunt use of the term ‘begging’: activity appropriate to sub-colonial status in the bilateral relation with America. The Club’s pragmatic realism cancels out all rhetorical pretensions of national dignity. It does so in the name of ‘survival’, an issue overriding any theoretical claim to state sovereignty.

Particularly striking in this respect is the final sentence of the passage just quoted. It projects a scenario. If Taiwan were forced to become part of China, then something like a refugee government would be set up in Los Angeles. But why LA? A chain of equivalents has somehow effortlessly shifted categories and borders, from the quasi nation-state of Taiwan to the global city of Los Angeles, magnet for Asian and Latino migration. But the shift in the imaginary is by no means ungrounded. From the 1960s to the 1990s, if the United States has been the prime land of emigration for Taiwanese, LA has been the site of the largest concentration of middle-class immigrants from the island. For the
Taiwanese imaginary, Taiwan has long been ‘inside’ LA, as an integral part of the city; the large residential community of Monterey Park is widely known as Little Taipei. Conversely, Los Angeles has also been ‘inside’ Taiwan, as an integral part of its life. The teenage rock band, LA Boys, all of whose members grew up in Los Angeles and can no longer speak Taiwanese or Mandarin, has now returned home, becoming one of the island’s most popular groups. So it is easy to imagine LA housing a Republic of China government in exile.

In March 2000, during the Presidential election campaign in Taiwan, all our satellite news channels set up ‘call-in’ interactive programmes to attract audiences, vital for ratings and advertising revenues. TVBS, a rather popular station, placed the physical site of its call-in across the ocean in Los Angeles. Actually, this was a rather natural choice. On the screen, supporters of the three Presidential candidates—the DPP’s Chen Shui-bian, the KMT’s Lian Chan and the People First’s James Soong—were divided into groups, identifiable by the different colours of their campaign jackets. The intensity of the enthusiasms and antagonisms expressed by these supporters was amazingly strong, more than anything one could find back home. They all wished to proclaim the fact that their own candidate was the real representative of New Taiwan, and his rivals were fakes—a typical tic of ethnic nationalism. Yet when asked by their TV host what constituted the ‘New Taiwanese’, they all agreed that ‘real New Taiwanese are those who live in Taiwan and are committed to Taiwan’. How do we explain this paradox?

Such supporters were in fact probably more involved in the election battle than most of those who actually live in the geographical space of Taiwan. They spared no means to further their respective causes: financial donations, persuasion of others to go home and vote (airlines supporting particular candidates offered discount tickets), debates with opponents, etc. They acted as if they themselves were the ‘real new Taiwanese who live in Taiwan, and are committed to Taiwan’. In effect, for them Los Angeles was already part of Taiwan. The physical distance between the island and the city was abolished by the televisual screen and the imaginary it sustains. This phenomenon is not, of course, uniquely Taiwanese. It is typical of many immigrant communities, who physically reside in different parts of the world, but in every other respect live ‘at home’: reading domestic newspapers, watching satellite news sent from home, consuming exactly the same goods and foods in
the supermarkets and restaurant chains set up by domestic enterprises, worrying more about changing governments at home than about those they have to live under; splitting and forming new alliances when home political parties split and form new parties.

*Stuffed to death by hamburgers*

How does the Letter handle possible objections to its programme? Here is what it says:

If you hear accomplices of the Chinese Communists cursing Club 51 as ‘slaves of a subject nation’, ‘traitors to the Han people’, running dogs of American imperialism, please argue back that national identity is based neither on blood descent nor threat of military force. Like the Chiang family, which has German, Russian and Japanese blood, we have the ‘right’ to choose to be American or German, and to live in New York or San Francisco.

This interesting passage makes it clear that the Club is well prepared for the kinds of disobliging expressions it is likely to attract, and has thought through its line of response to them. Anticipating likely directions of attack, it recruits and instructs the respectable ‘you’ to whom it appeals, in how to debate with ‘accomplices of Chinese Communism’. Its counter-argument is impeccably anti-essentialist, rejecting common descent as a basis for national identification. Boldly, it invokes the international marriages of the supposedly evil Chiang (Kai-shek) family as a reference point to legitimize free choice of nationality. Less clear, of course, is why only ‘American’ and ‘German’ are mentioned as identities of preference, and Russian or Japanese silently discarded. Indeed, Germany itself seems little more than a flourish, when the choice of cities is confined to the United States. Why this selectivity? The answer is offered a little later, when a dictum of Professor Lee Hsiao-fung’s is quoted: ‘We would rather be stuffed to death by the hamburgers of American imperialism than shot to death by the machine-guns of Chinese Communist imperialism’. The Club comments: ‘All of us try desperately to stay out of reach of China, and all of us nourish a deeply hidden “American dream” in our mind’. It goes on to spell out what lies behind hamburger heaven: ‘America is the pinnacle of the earth, a powerful, resourceful, democratic society, a land of certainty and security’. Here, courageously displayed, is what could be termed the open secret of the ‘deeply hidden American dream’ in
the psyche of Taiwanese *nouveaux riches* longing for an impossible assimilation to the US middle class.

Conversely, however, it would be a mistake in turn to essentialize this dream. Towards the end of the Letter, we read:

> If the Chinese break everyone’s glasses [sc. confound expectations] and build a free, democratic, universally prosperous, happy land on earth, while America becomes a poor, devastated inferno, the people of the state of Taiwan can always peacefully promote a movement to ‘unite Taiwan and China’, without any fear of suppression by American military force. In short, once Taiwan becomes a state of America, the door to either ‘Taiwanese independence’ or ‘reunification with China’ will not be closed, because America is a free and democratic country.

The logic of choice could not be clearer: economic success is the criterion for selecting national belonging. So we can keep the door open to China or any society rich and powerful enough to guarantee ‘freedom, democracy and wealth’, since the American State is such that if one day we change our mind and wish to leave it, that will be fine—it would make no objection. The Club appears not to have heard of the US Civil War, but that hardly matters, since it is so unlikely that anyone’s glasses will be broken anyway. The point is that its proposal dispenses with national loyalty. What is involved is pure calculation of interest. The Letter is alert to the kind of resistance this may provoke:

> Although you cannot immediately accept our case on an emotional level, we believe that on a rational level, you cannot deny that our new proposal for Taiwan’s future is the only solution to real crisis of our society.

To be effective, the Club must take account of nationalist sentiment rooted in a great deal of historical experience. It understands that the intended readers of its Letter are likely to feel very uneasy, ‘on an emotional level’, at the idea of simply becoming American. Although in practice lots of Taiwanese have as individuals become naturalized as US, Australian or Canadian citizens, to demand that everyone become American here and now is likely to offend people’s collective pride. So the Club urges its target audience to operate ‘rationally’, casting aside irrelevant emotional-moral-historical baggage, and acknowledge that there is no better way out than its proposal. Of course, its appeal to rationality has its own ‘emotional’ bottom line, in the calculated drive for
prosperity and security. This can also play on a sense of regret for the past. The feeling that ‘we would better off if we were still under Japanese rule’ is quite widespread among an elder generation that lived through the colonial period, and is not confined to them. Tacitly, the Club’s message to these people is: don’t let’s miss our chance again, we can make a rational choice to substitute the Americans for the Japanese.

If we look over the whole tenor of the Club’s Letter, what we find at work is a ‘radical plural opportunism’. I use the term without derogatory connotation. What it denotes is a non-essentialist, pragmatic, open-ended position, on the look-out to seize any opportunity for self-interest across a range of fronts, however radical one or other such move might be. The imperative is to jump, without much moral baggage, quickly and deftly onto whatever vehicle promises to advance one’s wealth and security. Operating within a conservative political society, in which critical forces lack the density to propose radical alternatives, this kind of outlook can be found in all corners of Taiwanese society—in politics, business, civil society or NGOs. One could even say that it is a general characteristic of Taiwanese, or perhaps any, capitalism.

Still, there is little doubt that current global conditions provide particularly fertile soil for such opportunism. Club 51 cannot be understood simply as the product of a fear of war in the Taiwan Straits or a colonial aspiration to American modernity. It also reflects a more general uncertainty about where the world is heading, dramatized by protests against the WTO and other reactions against globalization. No analysis can confidently figure out its overall effects and implications for the future world, although there is no difficulty in perceiving that gaps between countries and classes are likely to widen. In this environment, a strategy of leaning to the strongest party—‘the watermelon tilts toward the bigger half’, in our Taiwanese expression—makes middle-class sense. It is this background that explains why Chou Wei-lin’s book is ‘dedicated to the people of Taiwan who have no sense of security and certainty’. Rather than illustrating any epochal decline of the nation-state, Club

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1 In a recent forum held in Taipei, a young man with a Min-nan accent, confessing his disappointment with the performance of the new DPP government, expressed the same sentiment.

4 The term was coined by my friend, Huang Zhi-xiang, a prime-time TV scriptwriter, in the ‘Big Eunuch and Little Carpenter’ series, broadcast back in 1994.

5 A Date with the US, p. 2.
51 is evidence for the rise of identification—imaginary, symbolic and real—with the strongest State, the single world power today.

Not yet postcolonial

That power is still under-analysed, at least in Asia. This has something to do with the way postcolonial studies—where one would expect to find critical probing of it—have over-privileged ‘English’ experiences. This has partly reflected the personal histories of key proponents of the postcolonial programme, who mostly came out of the English (ex-)colonies. But it has also been due to the peculiarities of American imperial expansion itself, in which overseas colonies were of secondary importance. Amy Kaplan has described the resulting difficulty:

Most current studies of imperial and postcolonial culture . . . tend to omit discussion of the United States as an imperial power. The history of American imperialism strains the definition of the postcolonial, which implies a temporal development (from ‘colonial’ to ‘post’) that relies heavily on the spatial coordinates of European empires, in their formal acquisition of territories and subsequent history of decolonization and national independence. How would this Eurocentric notion of postcoloniality apply to the history of American imperialism, which often does not fit this model?6

This is a general reason why the American empire has escaped the kind of scrutiny European empires are now retrospectively undergoing. But there is a second reason specific to East Asia. In this part of the world, above all, there was a direct relay between an older kind of colonialism and new Cold War structures after 1945. Here the United States took over from former territorial empires, and established a vast arc of strategic protectorates, mobilized to form a defensive bloc against Communism. In many parts of East Asia there was a direct handover from Japanese imperialism to the US, and ever since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese state itself has lived in the permanent shadow of the American. Cho Hee-yeon has described the character

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of the South Korean regime set up by the US when it divided the country in terms that apply equally well to Taiwan or South Vietnam: authoritarian, developmentalist, statist and anti-Communist. While Japan was given a democratic constitution, a mailed fist by the occupation regime was used to make sure that the Right would remain perpetually in power, so the result was not very different. Fear of Communism was used very effectively to rule out of court any question of imperialism in the domination of Big Brother, despite the existence of mainstream anti-American sentiment and tradition across the region—with the exception of Taiwan.

**Cold War legacies**

In East Asia, consequently, the decolonization that unfolded elsewhere after the Second World War never occurred. Instead, a Cold War system effectively took over the structures of colonialism, intercepting any possibility of decolonization taking place. For fifty years the predominant world view and traditions of popular knowledge were generated out of systems of power and production at the intersection of colonialism and the Cold War. The cultural effects of this half century have been part of our local histories and subjectivities, and cannot be easily erased. Of course, the end of the Cold War was formally announced more than a decade ago. There can be no doubt of the reality of the changes this has brought to Europe and America. The USSR has disappeared, Germany has been unified, Eastern Europe is safely in the bosom of capital once more. Ideologically, ‘the triumph of capitalism and the end of socialism’ has become the dominant narrative in the West, now confidently extended into the ongoing epic of globalization, which has offered the framework for a new structure of feeling, in Raymond Williams’s sense, since the second half of the 1990s—rallying North American academics who had previously toyed with dangerous ideas of the postmodern or postcolonial, and comforting European intellectuals bent on the nostrums of a ‘Third Way’.

In East Asia, however, the situation has been very different. Empirically, the Cold War structures of the region have been weakened, but by no means dismantled. Chinese Communism, unlike Russian, has not been

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overthrown, and Indochina has not gone the way of Eastern Europe. Korea remains divided, and Taiwan a garrison state. There is still no peace treaty between Japan and Russia. Of course, Sino-American relations are warm enough these days; the two Kims have met in Korea; the KMT has lost power in Taiwan. But the very excitement generated by the 2000 summit in Pyongyang, and the subsequent heartbreaking scenes of family reunions in Korea, or jubilation at the downfall of the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan, speaks of the extent to which the dead weight of the Cold War is still an objective source of tension and frustration in East Asia. There is little radical discontinuity in the so-called post-Cold War politics of the area.

But even if the Cold War had come to an end in East Asia, it would be unrealistic to expect us to be freed from its mental legacy. Just as the formal end of colonialism did not overnight erase its cultural effects, so a Cold War formation of subjectivity remains with us. The postwar generation of intellectuals in South Korea and Taiwan were largely trained in the US, and these people, deeply imbued with an American outlook, are now in power to implement another round of modernization. The deeper bases of Washington’s continuing hegemony in East Asia are, however, often misunderstood. For this is an imperialism whose long-term impact has depended not so much on obvious cultural apparatuses such as transnational media intervention, but rather on a more complex process of negotiation and articulation between its political and economic power and local histories. Cultural studies of US imperialism in the region are only just starting to emerge, and it is important that they avoid the trap of counterposing one (subaltern) nationalism to another (paramount) nationalism, but rather maintain a critical internationalist perspective on the system of relations between them as a whole.

Taiwanese boy bands and Hong Kong movies

Thus it is too often assumed that the new imperialism operates largely through an external imposition of its cultural products and ideologemes on Third World societies, as if brain-washing them. Frequently cited examples are Hollywood or the American Top 40. Yet, however impor-

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8 For the sketch of a ‘geo-colonial historical materialism’ to explain this kind of articulation, see Kuan-Hsing Chen, ‘Decolonization and Cultural Studies’, Taiwan: A Radical Quarterly in Social Studies, 21, 1996, pp. 73–140.
tant these may have been originally, from the mid-1980s onwards not a few of the economies of the region have been strong enough to construct cultural industries of their own, capable of competing with American output. The result is that American mass cultural productions are only among a range of choices available to the younger population; the reign of their singularity has been broken. For some fifteen years now, Hong Kong films have captured the largest markets in various East Asian countries, and by the 1990s, the newest generations were no longer singing American pop songs in karaoke bars.

To understand the roots of American hegemony, we need to look elsewhere, and further back. Historically, ‘America’ as a cultural imaginary has since the mid-nineteenth century never been outside ‘Asia’, just as ‘Asia’ has never been outside ‘America’. Japan, after all, was first opened to the US state and capital in 1858, through the treaty-port system. Their impact thereafter, right through the inter-war period, is not to be understated. By the 1930s, there were local intellectuals who felt that ‘America’ had become a constitutive element of Japanese identity itself, as a startling passage from Takanobu Murobuse’s novel America, published in 1929, makes clear:

Where could you find Japan not Americanized? How could Japan exist without America? And where could we escape from Americanization? I dare to even declare that America has become the world, Japan is nothing but America today.

In Korea too, Yoo Sun-young has shown that during the same period the notion of American modernity fulfilled the function of a counternimaginary against the grip of Japanese colonialism. This sense was not, of course, confined to East Asia. In the Antilles, Aimé Césaire was warning soon after the War of the illusions accompanying it:

I know that some of you, disgusted with Europe, with all that hideous mess which you did not witness by choice, are turning—oh! in no great numbers—toward America and getting used to looking upon that country as a possible liberator. ‘What a godsend!’ you think. The bulldozers! The

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massive investment of capital! The roads! The ports!'—‘But American racism!'—‘So what? European racism in the colonies has inured us to it!'. And there we are, ready to run the great Yankee risk. So, once again, be careful! American domination—the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean from which one never recovers unscarred.\(^\text{10}\)

Césaire did not explain why American domination would be the only irremediable form. But few listened to his admonition, least of all in East Asia. There, the most striking testimony to the enduring fixation with America is to be found in the PRC, which was never directly under US influence. Since the 1980s, the US has been the dominant imaginary figure against which China constructs itself, the Other as totalized representative of the West. As a Mainland critic told a conference on popular culture in Beijing in 1999: ‘Today’s America is our tomorrow’. When the CCP launched its call to the nation to ‘join the mainstream’, no one doubted where that was: in the United States. Psychologically, America has become an ‘inside outsider’ or ‘outside insider’ against which slices of (national) identity and fragments of cultural subjectivity have been formed in differing national spaces. This process has by no means always involved simple acceptance of US hegemony. To see the strength of the ‘American complex’ in East Asia, one need only look at the current popularity of the ‘X Can Say No’ phenomenon. After the big success of Ishihara and Morita’s ‘The Japan that Can Say No’, came the popular ‘China Can Say No’, and even a ‘Taiwan Can Say No’.\(^\text{11}\) Unmistakeably, the US is the object-unity of this ‘No’. What it implies, of course, is the pre-existence of an indisputable ‘Yes’. Such refusals are a continuing sign of deep identification with what they deny but do not replace.

**Americas of the mind**

The key to the sway of this American imperialism has lain in its ability to insert itself into the geo-colonial space as the imaginary figure of modernity. After the Second World War, the material power of the US made it the central object of identification, and later dis-identification, as the neo-colonial master of the region. American systems of representation and modes of living infiltrated the space of the national-popular imaginary,

\(^{10}\) Discourse on Colonialism, New York 1972, p. 60.

\(^{11}\) See Song Qiang, Qiao Bian, Zhang Zangzang, China Can Say No, Beijing 1996; Ker Rey-ming, Taiwan Can Say No, Taipei 1996.
and redirected its flows of psychic desire and cultural energy. This chain of movements still traverses the social body. American English became the first foreign language to be acquired; the US became the routine—often only possible—space for graduate education; for state bureaucrats and oppositional intellectuals alike, the ‘American experience’ became a reference point of their own legitimation. It would be anachronistic to apply Fanon’s dictum of the sixties directly here—to suggest that Japanese, Koreans, Chinese or Taiwanese ‘want to be American’, in the same sense that ‘the black man wants to be white’. But in cases like Club 51, as we have seen, it is difficult to deny that a similar theoretical logic is at work.

There is no point in ridiculing any of this, or its opposite. Both pro- and anti-American modes operate within the same space, defined by the same object. We have to recognize that America has not only been a force outside us but lives within our subjectivity, if we wish honestly to understand the cultural composite of our self or selves. When something has become the dominant frame of reference, it is part of us. When the US—not the Philippines or Korea—is constantly cited as the exemplar to validate claims for democracy in Taiwan, it means that ‘we are American’, in the sense that we are not (do not want to be) Korean or Filipino. They do not even enter our field of vision. To recognize this is the necessary starting-point for us to move elsewhere. Unless the cultural imaginary of ‘America’ can be deconstructed, and the US as object of identification and dis-identification displaced, we are doomed to repeat the histories of colonialism taken over by the neo-imperial Cold War system—the vicious circle of colonization, decolonization and recolonization will simply continue.

Neither burning effigies of America nor confecting spurious ‘Asian values’ is a solution. What we need are rather alternative frameworks of reference. Since the Second World War, the flow of cultural influences has for the most part been in one direction only—from America to East Asia. Intellectual life offers an even starker illustration than the entertainments industry. US academic texts have travelled to, are actively read

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and taught in, East Asian Universities. Intellectual trends have largely reproduced fashions on American campuses. The reverse has never been the case. Worse, East Asian intellectuals are often only able to meet each other, if at all, at American conferences; and when such meetings do take place, ‘we’ easily look down on each other, for some of us are insufficiently abreast of the latest schools of thought in the West. Such is all too often the topic of conversation. There is little desire to read one another’s work, or to find out what is being debated in the various local intellectual scenes; and there is no circulation of texts from other countries within bookshops of the region. Language differences are often the excuse. But if we can read ‘English’ texts published in the US, why not read those published in Manila, Singapore or Calcutta?

That said, the end of the Cold War, which has not yet ended in our part of the world, has paradoxically not had the same depressive effects on critical thinking as in Europe. Although, here too, certain sectors of a once progressive opinion quickly adjusted to the wisdom of global capital and dropped any talk of socialism, among others there has been a concurrent sense of new hope. The gates to mutually prohibited zones are gradually being lifted in the region. Traffic among critical circles of intellectuals in its different societies has begun to quicken. New cross-border contacts and alliances are in the process of creation. Rather than in complete retreat, the Left—more precisely a new Left—seems to be on the move. The emergence of an inter-Asian public sphere, however tentative or modest, would be the beginning of that shift and multiplication of our frames of reference which is needed. What would be its effect? A celebration of imposed hybridity? A retreat into nativist purity? Rather, part of a decolonization in motion, in which ‘Asia’ and the ‘Third World’ offer alternative sites of identification to multiply our selves. Let us hope the result differs from the radical plural opportunism of Club 51 and its like.

Other articles in this series include Georgi Derluguian, ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ (NLR 3); Yang Lian, ‘Return to Beijing’ (NLR 4); Robert Wade, ‘Showdown at the World Bank’ (NLR 7).